

# The Baltimore Sun

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## Politicians in Annapolis gambling away budget

By **Jean Marbella**

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to bury the notion of Governing. It has been suffering the ravages of age for some time now, so it perhaps would not be surprising that people gather to bury rather than praise it.

And yet the site of its recent demise, Annapolis, is the real surprise.

If Governing is used to being maligned in certain places -- the offices of the **Cato Institute** perhaps, or the kind of tea parties that are more Rush Limbaugh than Earl Grey -- it tended to find haven in the halls of Maryland's capitol.

It may not be pretty, and it certainly never pleased everyone, but Governing tended to get done in Annapolis by the magical sine die, or last day of the 90-day legislative session.

It always seemed like a lot of manufactured drama to me, all the frantic horse-trading and arm-twisting culminating in final votes at the very last minute before Monday turned into Tuesday. But then, as someone who stretches deadlines on a daily basis I can't very well criticize lawmakers who do the same thing once a year to keep the government going.

But this year, the session ended instead in uncharacteristic midnight mayhem. Rather than hammering out a deal to raise revenue for the governor's \$35 billion spending plan, the General Assembly went home and left behind a default "Doomsday" budget.

The budget, which would cut hundreds of millions of dollars from education and other vital services, likely will not go into effect. Rather, conventional wisdom has it, there will be some posturing on all sides, but Gov. Martin O'Malley will call a special session and Senate President Mike Miller and House Speaker Mike Busch will get their acts together and hold off Doomsday for another year.

Still, it was quite the sorry spectacle of lawmakers unable to get to "yes." Which is what governing is all about.

Even though this wasn't the kind of partisan battle we've grown accustomed to, and weary of, in Washington -- all three leaders are Democrats -- it had the same discomfiting aspect. It gives the cynical, the government-is-broken set, the opportunity to ask: Can't anyone govern anymore?

That is something of an unfair question, of course. The same people who would

obstruct, who would pressure their representatives against compromise, are the ones who would say government is broken. It's a perversion of the old shopkeeper rule of "you break it, you own it." In this case, you break it, you complain it's broken.

What happened in Annapolis isn't a direct parallel to what's been going on in Washington, but it's part of the same landscape. The way taxes have become so politically radioactive these days is hampering the act of governing.

I'm not saying taxes should just go up willy nilly every year. But neither should they be the third rail that can never be touched for fear of instant political death.

We saw the effect of that last week, when as the clock ticked down, lawmakers spent their waning session hours talking about gambling.

Yes, the gazillion-dollar industry that is based on one indisputable fact: The house always wins.

The budget deal that legislators were expected to pass this session got bollixed up in Miller's desire to expand gambling in Maryland -- building a new casino at National Harbor in Prince George's County and adding table games to the five previously approved slots parlors in the state.

I'm not necessarily opposed to that -- though, again: The house always wins. But what bothers me is what I guess I'd call gambling creep.

Back during the endless debate over whether to approve slots parlors in Maryland, finally settled by voter referendum in 2008, a reporter who had been through a similar process in another state told me something that proved prescient: It's never just about slots.

Gaming operators get slots, they want table games. They get table games, they want a greater percentage of the haul. And on and on.

Well, that's what happened last week. Even as just two of the five planned slots parlors are up and running, even as lawmakers need to get the state's budget approved, we were back in gambling-expansion hell. And when the House refused to pass the Senate's gambling bill, the budget deal went by the wayside.

Gambling no doubt will add to the state's coffers. But how much, and when, remains a big unknown, and what to do in the meantime is what should have been the focus in Annapolis.

There was a case to be made for how the state was going to raise revenue to fund schools, transportation and the rest of our needs. Maybe it wouldn't have been convincing, maybe it would need to be tweaked, maybe an alternative would have emerged.

But the thing is, the case wasn't even made.